Computer Hobbyists'

Northern Newsletter

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With five issues published last year, this rather informal newsletter is well on its way in joining a host of other, like-minded periodicals, born on the cheap side of publishing, the amateur side,(if not it is hoped the amateurish side). Here we explore the computing and amateur programming hobby/passtime. Another year of at least a similar number of issues is looked forward to at this time of writing. If you find any article in this newsletter worth copying, just put it on the old photocopier. That's what it is there for. (Public domain means copy freely everybody.) So here goes for another year of news, views, predictions and features for the amateur computer hobby.

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BARGAIN YEAR FOR 1991? -Will computer prices plummet to new lows in 1991? Possibly, if only temporarily. With all the used PC compatibles being placed on the market with business bankrupcties this year and last, the lowering of prices on garden variety IBM™XT's and compatibles(with minimum hard disk included)is speeding the process, already started, of business surplus IBM PC or XT or compatible computers coming into the hands of amateurs and even students at extraordinarily low prices. Even a home shopping channel is advertising refurbished true IBM™PC's, monitors and software for prices that even a year ago would have been considered reasonable for clones without anything bundled with them....Those waiting for bargains in Commodore Amigas or Atari ST-compatibles probably had a disappointing Christmas, although the Amiga 500 is still priced favourably compared to a Commodore 64 and disk drive....The news of the holiday was the Macintosh Classic, still a pricey computer, but reduced enough that stores were backordered by Christmas and factories putting on extra shifts.... The NeXT computer, a very advanced concept proved disappointing in sales due no doubt to high prices and being launched into a recession. Some improvements and going back to magnetic disk interface as optical disks failed to take off as envisioned have now materialized. We shall wait and see. One good sign is the first issue of a new magazine devoted to the NeXT computer appearing on the newsstands this month....In the IBM™compatible world, more and more people are coming to the conclusion that the OS/2™operating system is not going to be the future of IBM™compatible computing. It is looking more and more like a wannabee that just did not make the grade in the real world....In the world of classic and orphaned computers, more and more of their once faithfull users are switching to cheap IBM™compatibles, which are not bad computers for those of the hacker and techno-tinkering frame of mind. In fact the very intricacies that slowed their acceptance as home computers make them all the more endeared of by hackers. Added to that is the tinker-toying that the open architecture expansion slots permit the hardware buff plus the low cost of cloned parts that makes damage due failed experiments with the hardware fairly non-traumatic to the wallet. The end result is a computer type that attracts hobbyists and experimentors with an above-average inclination to tinker and program like honey draws flies. So it is into the IBM-compatible camp that the former Timex-Sinclair, Commodore™64, Radio Shack™ TRS-80 and Color Computer owners are turning increasingly and to which a whole new generation of hobbyists are basing their hobby on. So IBM compatible computers and MS DOS™have now become the standard for hobby computing as well as work. That in retrospect, the emergence of one standard above all others for both work and the hobby, seems totally unexpected. Who could have predicted?....

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WINTER FUN- When the temperature dips too low, and when the cold clouds dump on us, we computer hobbyists don't care, snug in our houses of logic made from the programmers' blue-prints,, and the screen phosphors' quivering soul shadows.

Classic or Orphan Computers-As low cost computing is now focused on the IBM™PC standard of compatibility, many hobbyists who once were fans of a particular model of orphan computer,(usually 8-bit micro-processor based) have bought IBM compatibles. Surprisingly many have not thrown out their old classics but kept them running, often side-by-side with the new IBM compatible. Rather than pay fantastic prices for multi-user systems like UNIX™, or OS/2™, and the costly hardware capacity they need, the old orphan can be kept handy with a spreadsheet or database ready to boot and use while running another application on the 'big' computer. That way you do not need to get out of a wordprocessor and reboot if you need to look up a club member's phone or a computer part number or do some quick figuring on the spreadsheet. But most of those probably keep the orphan for trying out simple programming ideas. As a bonus, if the 'big' computer breaks down you still have a second one, and IBM compatibles, especially laptops do breakdown, the high tech switching power supplies being particularly vulnerable.

What's In A Name?

Take my name for example. Or don't take it at all on second thought. Perhaps, for the purposes of this illustration no. Just call me 'anonymous'. And to savour that a bit, doesn't it start to give this a creepy ring? But if we relate to names in an emotional way, even not noticing it at the time, but the emotion plunging into the subconscious still colours our perceptions, perhaps by tinging the lens of instinct through which we are focusing at the time, with a rosy or darker hue momentarily, but the colour subsequently remembered along with the rest of the picture, that is a characteristic of human intelligence. It has been called apperception, gut feeling, intuition, or just "that gives me the creeps", but it is there, a fact of human thinking, a part of our "wired in hardware" of existence. Computers relate to names quite differently, and with this comes a problem. How can a computer be taught to "get the creeps" when a user with a name that doesn't quite add up signs on to a classified data network dealing in secrets, presents a phony name for credit, and so on? This is a good illustration of a more general problem, the fact that computer 'artificial intelligence' may not really copy human intelligence or emulate it at all closely, but in fact be a different kind of intelligence all together, growing now in the computer labs like a genetic mutant mouse with the trunk of an elephant and the webbed feet of a duck. And the heart of a bored, dull clerk

So what does a computer see in a name anyway? The computer, at least at this stage of technology will get it in written form, a combination of 26 letters (plus a hyphen) or double that if lower case and capitals are used. Typically it will look the name up on a list, either a list of names to be rejected or a list of names to be accepted (or possibly both). The computer must be prorammed not to be confused by capitals when it is expecting lower case, so, Mr. DeLavignette is not taken as someone not matching the name on the list, using small letters, Mr. deLavignette. Neither should Mr. deLavignette be taken as not being the same person as Monsieur deLavignette, MR. de la Vignette, J-P de Lavignette (if those are indeed the correct initials) and so on. Matching strings has some rules (like ignoring capital-lower case distinctions), matching names has others, matching how a name sounds when heard over the telephone and misspelled has others (the Soundex system is one attempt to cope with the same sounds spelled differently in names and not completely successfully), all these factors may call for extra routines to be added to the program beyond a simple string search and deciding which ones and how to implement them to reduce the errors that will inevitably result to a minimum is quite a challenge for program design. Somebody has to sit down in every individual application and do some sincere head scratching. The result will not be the same as a human intelligence doing the screening. This is not to claim that human's don't make mistakes. In fact a person may be fooled by a person asking entry who can't spell the person's name correctly that is being impersonated, and may let MaConnel in when the list says, MacConnell. The computer will match names more carefully than that, but if it is only matching names, say against a reject list, it might let in a lot of questionable person that a person would not, like J. Edgar Hoover, Bennedict Arnold, "Frank And Stein", Abraham Lincoln and so on. Similarly if it were programmed too precisely to match names it might exclude Abraham Lincoln Brown, yet still miss Baby Jane. The point is that it works differently, and that is not just limited to word skills or higher sorts of artificial emulation of human intelligence, but to computer arithmetic algorithms which due to memory, speed and complication limitations in debugging algorithms as well as the demand for a kind of mechanical consistency of results, do their arithmetic quite differently than you or I would. (Doubt it? Ask your computer to split the 25¢ that two of us might pay for a paper that we will share this morning. I doubt if it will say, "I'll get it this time, you buy it tomorrow." It is more likely to chug through 7 or more places of decimals even though it will just throw away most of them.) There is more than one way for a human to do most things and more than one way to program a computer to do it, but they are not at all likely to go through the same sequence of steps in doing it, or be asked to.

Just ask John McBrown, who got through immigration when the computer did not identify him as John Brown, revolutionary, as a human might have, Charles Smith-Jones, Andrew van der Haugens Boomrat, whom the computer, running out of space, did not match with Andrew Boomrat, but with A. van der Haugens Boom.